

Washington, D.C. - On Wednesday, the House of Representatives voted to approve the final version of the Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act. Included in the legislation was Congressman Teague's bill to assist caregivers that accompany veterans when they have to travel to be seen by a doctor. The Teague provision expands the Department of Veterans' Affairs authority to make per diem and lodging payments to those caring for veterans that are receiving medical treatment.

"This is a common sense bill and something we should have done for our veterans and their families years ago," said Congressman Harry Teague who serves on the House Veterans Affairs Committee. "I've met with many New Mexico Veterans throughout my district who have told me about being forced to rely on their family, friends or other veterans to drive them to medical appointments that are often times 3 or 4 hours away from their homes. And I have heard from family members who often have to travel with their loved ones to the VA hospital hundreds of miles away knowing that they cannot afford to stay in a hotel room if an appointment runs late or an examination takes too long. We are changing that so that veterans aren't discouraged from seeking the healthcare they need simply because they can't afford the trip to the VA."

The New Mexico Department of Veterans' Services estimates that approximately 56,000 veterans in New Mexico have to be transported to a Veterans' Hospital annually. Currently, the only lodging option for caregivers of inpatient veterans is to apply to stay in one of the 27 beds offered at the Veterans' hospital. Renting a hotel room at their own expense is often times cost prohibitive for caregivers as well.

In addition to the Teague provisions to assist caregivers, this historic legislation also creates a caregiver support program, improves health care services for America's women veterans, and expands the mental health services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), among other things.

The bill now heads to the Senate.

S. 1963 - The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act

Provides Caregiver Support

S. 1963 provides immediate support for veteran caregivers by creating a program to offer

caregiver training, access to mental health counseling, and 24 hour respite care in the veteran's home. This allows caregivers temporary relief without having to leave the veteran at a medical facility. Veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) are eligible to select a caregiver to receive a financial stipend along with travel and lodging expenses associated with the veteran's care.

Welcomes Home Women Veterans

S. 1963 expands and improves VA services for the 1.8 million women veterans currently receiving VA health care - AND goes one step further by anticipating the expected increase of women warriors over the next five years. This bill seeks to build a VA health care system respectful of the unique medical needs of women veterans. For the first time, VA will be authorized to provide health care for newborn infants of women veterans.

Prevents Veteran Homelessness

S. 1963 essentially expands the number of places where homeless veterans may receive supportive services. For veterans struggling without a roof over their heads, this small change in the law will make a big difference in their lives.

Rural Health Care

S. 1963 includes key provisions to improve the health care provided to our rural veterans by authorizing stronger partnerships with community providers and the Department of Health and Human Services. These collaborations will allow VA to offer healthcare options to service members living far from the nearest VA medical facility. S. 1963 also requires the VA to establish a grant program for veteran service organizations to provide transportation options to veterans living in highly rural areas.

Increases Mental Health Care Access

S. 1963 addresses the troubling reality of post traumatic stress and troubling incidents of suicide among the veteran population. This bill requires a much-needed and long-awaited study on veterans' suicide and requires the VA to provide counseling referrals for members of the Armed Forces who are not otherwise eligible for readjustment counseling.

Other Veteran Health Care Provisions

- Creates a National Quality Management Officer to act as the principal officer responsible

for the Veteran Health Administration's quality assurance program

- Provides for a pilot program studying the use of community organizations and local and State government entities in providing care and benefits to veterans.
- Requires the VA to contract with the Institute of Medicine to study the health impact of Project Shipboard Hazard and Defense.
- Creates a pilot program, which would provide specified dental services to veterans, survivors, and dependents of veterans through a dental insurer
- Prohibits the VA from collecting copayments from veterans who are catastrophically disabled.
- Provides higher priority status for certain veterans who are Medal of Honor recipients.
- Requires the VA to provide hospital care, medical services, and nursing home care for certain Vietnam-era veterans exposed to herbicide and Gulf-War era veterans who have insufficient medical evidence to establish a service-connected disability.
- Establishes a position for the Director of Physician Assistant Services in the central VA office reporting to the Chief of the Office of Patient Services.
- Creates a Committee on Care of veterans with traumatic brain injury